

My Time in Prison at ISP

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It didn't hit me until I got to work Tuesday afternoon what I was about to do - cover a basketball game inside the Indiana State Prison. For weeks, I couldn't get over the fact that this is what I was about to embark on. But after experiencing it up close and personal, it was an experience like no other. My previous two experiences inside a prison came under much different circumstances. The first was when I was in sixth grade, when my family visited Alcatraz Island in San Francisco. The other instance was when I was in college and I had to visit an inmate as part of a class project for a news writing class I took. But Tuesday was a whole new experience, and I would be hard-pressed to ever do something like that for the rest of my career. And after doing it, I was glad I did. As you might suspect, I was nervous. Like most of you, I had the rough image of what prison is like because of portrayals by various media outlets worldwide, but so much was unknown. When my editor pitched the idea to me, his words were, "The prison has a basketball team." My first thought was "Oh boy." He explained it to me and I agreed to do it. On my way home that night, I couldn't help but think about how I should go about this assignment. Did I make a mistake agreeing to it? Nothing I've ever encountered might have gotten me ready for this. Then I started to think how impressive this could look in my portfolio. I can't think of many colleagues who would want to, or be willing to go inside a maximum-security prison to cover a sporting event. The only thing in my career that's had more security at an event that I covered was the NCAA men's basketball tournament. Tuesday's experience at ISP was similar. I had to hand over my driver's license, go through a metal detector, then have the metal bar sweep and get padded down. Door after door after door, the Bethel College basketball team, our photographer and myself, had to wait for the door behind us to close before the one in front of us would open. And each time we did, we had to make sure there were 14 of us in the group. Once through the final gate, we were in the courtyard inside the prison walls. I kept thinking to myself, "Gosh, I'm inside a prison." While walking through, I was amazed at what I saw: tennis courts, basketball courts, even a lacrosse net. The recreation building, to me, actually looked like a small replica of Hinkle Fieldhouse in Indianapolis. Old and cold. Once I got comfortable with my surroundings, I started to jot down notes of what I saw. "Weight equipment." "Video games." "Cable television." Then, just like the players for Bethel told me, once the game started, it was just another game. Even as more inmates made their way into the rec building after dinner, I still felt it was just another basketball game I was covering. When the game ended, I was still in that game-coverage mode, tracking down Bethel's coach afterward. Later, I interviewed a pair of inmates who played in the game - Thomas Fondren and Raymond Powell. Fondren is in on an armed robbery conviction while Powell is in on a murder conviction. I never would've known it after speaking with them and how appreciative they seemed to have me there and how polite they were. Once leaving the facility, I felt better about my experience and already began doing what I have grown accustomed to doing after leaving a sporting event in which I covered - formulate in my head how I wanted to tell the

story. After experiencing this, I would encourage teams who have ever pondered doing such a thing to give it a shot. Security is as tight as you could ever imagine, and they will do everything possible to make sure you feel safe. They are so grateful when teams come in to play them, and the last thing they want is for something to happen to you and never have teams come in and play them again. Give it a chance. Be sure to check out sports writer Nick Dettmann's blog "The Stratosphere" at www.thenewsd Dispatch.com. Contact him at ndettmann@thenewsd Dispatch.com, or 874-7211, Ext. 447.

About The Department of Correction

The Department employs over 8,000 employees and houses 24,000 adult and juveniles in 32 facilities, ranging from minimum to maximum custody, prison camps, juvenile facilities and work release centers. The Department's home page on the Internet can be found at: <http://www.in.gov/indcorrection>. The Department's Re-entry Site can be found: <http://www.reentry.in.gov>.